

**THE INTERFACE BETWEEN TECHNOLOGY
AND OUTCOME INFORMATION:
THE EXPERIENCE OF IOWA LEGAL AID**

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I. Executive Summary

The use of technology in our daily lives has exploded during the last thirty years. Communications, formerly done by U.S. mail and telephone, now occur through facsimile transmission, e-mail, and the Internet. Legal Services programs have not been exempt from the rapid change in the use of technology. When talking to long-time legal services staff not much prodding is needed to initiate reminiscing about the use of manual typewriters, carbon paper, and the first electric typewriter with a correction ribbon. In contrast, three decades later, legal services advocates have access to the Internet from their desktops, community education occurs through website publications, and attorneys file court documents on-line.¹

Using technology to capture, report, and analyze outcome information for multiple purposes is a natural outgrowth of the ever increasing use of technology in law practice, particularly in legal services programs. This paper will explore how technology can be used to capture, report, and analyze outcome information for multiple purposes by describing the increased use of technology and its use to measure outcomes in the legal service delivery system of Iowa Legal Aid.

Specifically, the paper will explain briefly the evolution of the case management system used by Iowa Legal Aid, resulting in the use of the web-based case management system, Pika. Explanation of the development of outcome codes is provided, along with a summary of how outcomes are captured in the case management system. The variety of reports available will be summarized. The paper concludes with an explanation of the various ways outcome data, once measured and reported, can be analyzed. Present uses are illustrated, and potential uses are explored throughout the paper.

II. Iowa Legal Aid and Case Management Systems

As part of the state planning process, effective January 1, 2003, there was one LSC funded grantee in the state of Iowa. Iowa Legal Aid was created through the merger of the two LSC funded grantees in the state, the Legal Aid Society of Polk County and the Legal Services Corporation of Iowa. The Legal Aid Society of Polk County was formed in 1951 to provide legal assistance to Polk County's low-income residents. The Legal Services Corporation of Iowa was formed in 1977 to serve the legal needs of low-income Iowans in the rest of the state. Since January 1, 2003, Iowa Legal Aid has provided services to residents of all 99 counties of the state of Iowa from offices located in 10 communities. The ten regional offices of Iowa Legal Aid are located in Cedar Rapids, Council Bluffs, Davenport², Des Moines, Dubuque, Iowa City, Mason

¹For more an in-depth exploration of present and future uses of technology in legal services work, see John Tull, "Technology and the Future of Legal Services," Management Information Journal, Volume XIV.2, Summer 2000, pp.35-41.

²HELP Legal Assistance in Davenport, Iowa, is a sub-grantee of Iowa Legal Aid, and serves Iowa residents

City, Ottumwa, Sioux City, and Waterloo.

During the years immediately prior to merger, the Legal Services Corporation of Iowa was using Turbo-Cases for case management and timekeeping purposes. Furthermore, each of Legal Services Corporation of Iowa's ten offices managed separate Turbo-Cases databases residing on Novell local area networks. The Legal Aid Society of Polk County was using Kemp's Clients for Windows, also on a local Novell server. One result of this configuration was that the tabulation of program wide or statewide data required the exporting of data to a central location, which was a time consuming and complicated process. In addition, basic case management functions such as checking conflicts and transferring files, required time consuming communications between regional offices. Efficient and reliable systems for tracking outcomes were essentially non-existent.

In the planning process leading up to merger, Legal Services Corporation of Iowa and Legal Aid Society of Polk County staff undertook an extensive analysis of issues and available applications for the future program's case management and client database needs. Ultimately, staff selected Pika Software as the case management and client database application for Iowa Legal Aid. At the time staff were reviewing case management options, only one legal services program, Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services, had been using Pika. That being the case, it would seem that the decision to select Pika was risky. However, several factors contributed to the selection of Pika which mitigated these potential risks. The first is the fact that Pika is an open source application built on platforms that are widely used and stable. Perhaps more important is the fact that the program's Technology Advocate was knowledgeable of the applications that were incorporated into Pika's design, which provided a capacity for programming changes to be handled in-house. Equally important is the fact that Pika is web based, which has proven to be both cost effective and highly efficient in terms of bandwidth requirements. In the final analysis, Pika was a good fit for the newly reorganized Iowa Legal Aid. It has provided the program with a high degree of flexibility in terms of programming changes, thus enabling Iowa Legal Aid to have a case management application designed to address the specific needs and objectives of the program. This was critical to the development of systems for measuring outcomes.

Iowa Legal Aid recognized at the time of the merger the need to develop systems to measure outcomes through the use of its case management system. Beginning in November 2002, staff began periodic meetings to develop outcome codes that would address the requirements of several funding sources and also the need for internal consistency in measuring client outcomes. After distribution of initial drafts of proposed outcomes, a program wide committee was formed that developed outcome and main benefit codes to be used for every intake and file closure. The committee reviewed the literature available regarding the definitions of inputs, outputs and outcomes. After many meetings and multiple drafts, the committee

reached consensus on the use of “main benefit” codes to be used in conjunction with the field labeled “outcome” to reflect how the client’s situation was changed as a result of the legal advice and assistance provided.³ The committee agreed that a change in knowledge and status would be the most often reported change in the client’s situation as a result of legal assistance received from Iowa Legal Aid. The main benefits codes were finalized and staff began using them for closing cases in May 2003.

III. Capture of outcomes

The Pika case management system tracks the number and types of cases handled; the level of service provided; financial benefits received as a result of the representation; and the outcome achieved by the client, including the main benefit derivative of the services provided. This system tracks cases through the information entered into the database when advocates close cases. See Supplement A for the “Administrative” Tab Screen advocates use when closing cases using the Pika case management system.

The following information is entered into the case management system: LSC case closure codes, outcomes, and main benefits. The closing codes, from the LSC Case System Reporting system, provide information about the levels of service provided to clients. Outcome codes list the effects of the case, whether favorable, unfavorable, educated/referred to another provider. Main benefits list specific results for the clients, such as whether the client obtained a protective order, whether child support was awarded to the client, whether the loss of housing was prevented, or whether the client obtained financial gain.

With Pika, staff play a much greater role in using the available technological tools for tracking outcomes. With Turbo-Cases, virtually all data entry was performed by support staff. Pika requires advocates to integrate the task of inputting and maintaining accurate data into their case handling routine. Therefore, it is critically important for advocates to “buy into” the system of data entry, which in all candor, does not happen right away. However, the analysis and evaluation of staff acceptance of Pika, established that overall, advocates viewed Pika as a major improvement, notwithstanding the evolution of their role in performing data entry.⁴

For the most part, advocates do the data entry in closing cases, so their cooperation and

³The “main benefits” reflect the most commonly used definition of “outcomes” as used in the literature, that is, to reflect changes in the client’s status, knowledge, behavior or attitude. See Colleen M. Cotter, “Performance and Outcomes Measurement Project: Preliminary Report,” LSC Outcomes Summit, June 21, 2003, pp. 3-5, for definition of “outcome.”

⁴Iowa Legal Aid conducted pre-test and post-test surveys of staff to gauge their opinions regarding the transition to Pika. See “Iowa Case Management and Database Integration Project Evaluation”, Edward Saunders, University of Iowa, School of Social Work. At lstech.org/projects/tig_2001_32/iowa_pika_evaluation.pdf.

understanding of the system is important. When an advocate closes a case, he or she selects the appropriate codes from drop down menus. There are separate fields to record the outcome and the main benefit. The “main benefit” codes are linked by number to the legal problem code. For example, when closing a child support case (legal problem 38), an advocate needs to choose one of five outcomes: “favorable,” “unfavorable,” “educated/referred–sufficient service,” “educated/referred–insufficient resources,” or “referred to volunteer attorney,” and one of five possible “main benefit” codes: 3800–Educated/Referred, 3801--Obtained/increased child support, 3802–Maintained child support, 3803–Avoided/terminated/reduced child support, 3899–Other. The committee that drafted and developed the system thought that the use of these main benefit codes in conjunction with the outcomes codes would provide enough options to explain the effect of the advice or representation in the client’s life, while being manageable, in terms of data entry, for the advocate/staff member. The committee’s purpose was to use both codes to accurately portray how the client’s situation was changed by the provision of legal assistance by Iowa Legal Aid.

One of the drawbacks of the system is that an “other” code was included to cover situations where none of the more specific codes would be appropriate. Some advocates, when closing cases, use the “other” code when another code would be more descriptive of the main benefit. Those advocates are sometimes later asked to go back and enter a more appropriate main benefit code when, for example, a staff member is preparing a report required by a funding source and needs to list the “main benefits” that had occurred as a result of the grant funding for particular types of cases. In discussions during a site visit with one grantor of funds, the suggestion was offered that “other” be eliminated as an option for a main benefit. That issue has not been resolved at the time of this writing.

One of the advantages of Pika is that it is an open source application that affords Iowa Legal Aid tremendous flexibility in designing data systems for tracking service by a variety of variables. Iowa Legal Aid can modify and add to these data collection tools without having to rely on outside vendors with proprietary interests. Additional main benefit codes can be added when needed, or other information needed can be garnered through the addition of fields.

A prime example of the adaptability of Pika occurred recently when the U.S. Department of Justice changed its reporting requirements for the Legal Assistance to Victims grant through the Violence Against Women Act Office. The staff who work in the Survivors and Families Rural Access Project (SAFRAP), Iowa Legal Aid’s rural domestic abuse project funded by the VAWA Office of the Department of Justice, have met and designed new outcome measurement systems in Pika to track data now required by the Department of Justice. The new data tracking systems are incorporated in a VAWA tab that is accessed from each client’s case record in Pika. See Supplement B for the VAWA tab on Pika. The development of the new VAWA data tracking system is a good example of how the flexibility of Pika has aided in the development of new systems for gathering data.

Another example of the importance of gathering outcome information is illustrated through another grant's reporting requirements. Iowa Legal Aid receives funding from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) for operation of a Low-Income Taxpayer Clinic (LITC) to serve low-income clients whose primary language is not English, and also to do referrals for low-income clients who have tax controversies with the IRS. To ensure that clients eligible to be served under the grant are identified and that all needed information is gathered for the reports required by the IRS, an LITC Questionnaire has been added to the "Eligibility" Tab in Pika for intake workers to complete during initial client intake interviews. When certain questions are answered positively or negatively, the intake worker is instructed to use a special problem code that will identify the type of tax problem or assistance the client will need. This modification made in response to the reporting requirements of the IRS, will allow Iowa Legal Aid to correctly report the types of tax issues handled and the benefit to the client. Supplement C is a copy of the Eligibility Tab from Pika.

Iowa Legal Aid also operates, as a special project, the Legal Hotline for Older Iowans. Formerly funded by the Administration on Aging (AoA), and now supported by multiple grants with varied reporting requirement, the Hotline needed to develop reporting systems to address the requirements of several funding sources. Once again, the flexibility that is a hallmark feature of Pika enabled Iowa Legal Aid to create special data gathering tools for this project. See Supplement D, the Hotline Tab in Pika, that collects the information needed for reports and grant applications for Administration on Aging and the local area agencies on aging.

IV. Reporting of outcomes

Outcomes are reported for external use, such as in reports to funding sources, and for internal use, such as evaluating the effectiveness of a special project. With the flexibility inherent in Pika, Iowa Legal Aid generates a multitude of reports using the data that has been collected through the case management system. Since the outcome and main benefit measurement system has only been in use for approximately one year, the advantages and challenges of the use of these codes in reports has not been fully tested. As data is collected during the coming year, it is anticipated that new fields may need to be added to the data base, as well as additional report definitions. With the flexibility of Pika, those modifications will be made relatively smoothly. The following is a summary of some of the reports and reporting systems that have been developed to date, with examples of how these reports have enabled Iowa Legal Aid to successfully meet various reporting requirements.

Pika 3.0 is designed with pre-defined reports that provide an easy means of generating data for basic purposes such as LSC CSR reporting. Other reports available through the Pika Case Management System include the Daily Intake Report that allows a report of all intakes and case activity for a certain day in a specific office and the Evaluation Report which gathers Case Service Reporting (CSR) data for individual advocates for a certain time period in order to facilitate individual employee performance reviews.

In addition to the predefined reports, the software has advanced reporting capability that enables users to generate data using specific filters in the case and activity fields contained in the database. This provides the capacity to develop customized reports. For example, the State of Iowa Interest on Lawyers Trust Account (IOLTA) Commission requires a semi-annual and annual report on how its grant monies are being expended. Iowa Legal Aid reports, along with budget expenditures and other fiscal matters, on the number of cases each IOLTA-funded advocate has closed during the reporting period, and the number and location of community education and outreach activities. Prior to the use of Pika, with the Turbo Case reporting system, each regional office would have to generate a report on the local level and send it to the Central Administrative Office for reporting. Now, with the use of Pika, reports are generated from the Central Administrative Office. If there are any questions about a particular case or activity, an e-mail can be sent to the advocate, with the case record or report actually attached to enable the advocate to review data to ensure accuracy.

The Advanced Case Report is primarily used to generate reports about specific types of cases. The combinations are many: a report can be run showing cases closed between certain dates by an individual advocate, by a funding code, or by office. Other options include tallying number of clients by county or city of residence, age, or disability. For example, it is possible to run a report that lists the clients in Polk County, Iowa, who are female, under the age of 18, and sought help regarding SSI. The report could further show which clients had a favorable outcome with a main benefit of obtaining SSI benefits in 2003. In addition, the “financial benefit” field shows the amount of back benefits and current year’s benefits awarded.

The flexibility of Pika allows adaptation of reports to fit reporting requirements for new funding sources or changes in the reporting requirements of current funding sources. As mentioned above, the Department of Justice required additional information in its semi-annual reports, and through the development of the VAWA tab, the information required can be gathered and reported. See Supplement B.

Outcomes are also required to be reported to the thirteen United Way agencies that provide funding to Iowa Legal Aid.⁵ Each agency differs slightly in its definition of outcomes, how outcomes should be assessed, and the required reporting. The staff of the Development Unit consults with each local regional managing attorney and the local United Way agency to determine what is expected in the drafting and reporting of outcomes. Due to the flexibility of Pika, the reporting of outcomes can be adapted, depending on the local preference. For example,

⁵United Way agencies were among the first funding sources requiring outcome reporting from Iowa Legal Aid. This is part of a national trend, as confirmed by the Preliminary Report presented by Colleen M. Cotter at the June 2003 Outcomes Summit, who stated that “[t]he United Way led the drive toward developing and reporting outcome measurements in the non-profit sector.” Cotter, p. 11. See also, United Way of America, “Measuring Program Outcomes: A Practical Approach,” 1996.

the United Way of Central Iowa in Des Moines set priorities for funding for organizations working on outcomes defined by the United Way Community Impact Agenda set by the Des Moines Human Services Planning Alliance. Thus Iowa Legal Aid established the following outcomes for the coming fiscal year:

Low-income residents of Polk, Dallas, and Warren Counties will achieve the following outcomes consistent with the United Way of Central Iowa and Community Priorities:

- Domestic abuse survivors obtain protection orders, obtain custody orders, divorces, protect visitation rights, and secure child support or prevent unreasonable support.
- Families maintain housing through prevention of evictions and obtain safe, affordable housing.
- Individuals will increase their income through filing for the Earned Income Credit, and receiving/maintaining government financial assistance and health care benefits, such as FIP, food stamps, general welfare or other benefits to which they are entitled.
- Individuals gain knowledge of legal rights and responsibilities through advice, brief service, referral, or community legal education.

These outcomes will be measured by generating an Advanced Case Activity Report, which filters for the funding source and the closure date of the case. The report will include the problem code, outcome code and main benefit code. Staff can then focus on the specific goals of the United Way of Central Iowa. For example, in the housing area, the report will show how many cases “prevented eviction,” “delayed eviction,” or “obtained repairs/safe housing.” Those outcomes for clients can be reported to the United Way of Central Iowa. Since this is the initial year for the use of measuring and reporting outcomes and main benefits through Pika, we will be learning from this experience and making adjustments as we move forward.

Other United Way agencies in the state require different types of reports, and Pika can also be used for that reporting. Some local United Way agencies require reports that tally the number of people helped in a certain time period, by age range (e.g. under 18, 18 -24, etc.), ethnicity, and county and/or city of residence. Some also require a report on outcomes for clients. Pika is able to generate such data by funding code enabling staff to easily report such information. The Turbo-Cases case management system was not easily modified to add fields which would enable Iowa Legal Aid to track and report the varying information required by its numerous funding sources.

V. Analyze outcomes

The outcomes and main benefits reported for clients have the potential for analysis and evaluation in a number of different contexts. In reviewing and applying for grants to fund legal assistance for low-income Iowans, case data and outcomes can be reviewed to determine the need for a particular service. Many grant sources require periodic reporting of case outcomes and that data is also provided as part of the application for new or renewed funding. In addition,

regional office managing attorneys can use the data in evaluating individual performance of advocates. Office strengths and weaknesses related to the provision of service can also be assessed. It is also anticipated that outcome and main benefit data will be useful to the Board of Directors in the needs assessment/priority setting process to be initiated this year.

The options listed above are all potential uses of the outcome data available through the Pika Case Management System. However, not all uses have been tested. The main areas where use of outcome and main benefit codes has been or will be used in the near future are the grant applications for funding, and the reports on grant progress to funding sources. They have already been used extensively, as mentioned above, with almost all United Way agencies that fund Iowa Legal Aid, since all require some type of outcome reporting, either monthly, quarterly, semi-annually, or annually.

Another example is the Homeless Assistance Grants money through the Iowa Department of Economic Development (IDED) which required outcomes for the homeless prevention activities proposed by Iowa Legal Aid. Staff of Iowa Legal Aid had learned from IDIED that the prior year's application had received low scores on the section regarding outcomes. Staff spent more time consulting with IDIED, attending a workshop IDIED sponsored on outcome planning, and writing outcomes for the grant application. The amount of the grant for the coming fiscal year increased from last year. Although not confirmed as part of the reason, Iowa Legal Aid hopes this is a sign that the time spent on evaluating and presenting outcomes helped in obtaining increased funding for homeless prevention activities.

Another potential use for outcome evaluation is in marketing. In 2002, the state of Iowa was fortunate to be included as one of three pilot states in the *Campaign for Equal Access: Bringing Justice Home* project initiated by the National Legal Aid and Defender Association (NLADA) and the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP). The pilot states were selected to develop "on the ground" statewide communications plans. The Legal Services Corporation, the Iowa State Bar Foundation and the American Bar Association also participated through funding and as strategic partners. Legal aid programs in the state of Iowa, through the communications study, were the beneficiary of a Marketing Plan developed by Valerie Denny Communications from Chicago, Illinois. One of the "Short-Term Strategies" recommended in that Marketing Plan is the development of "Success Stories" in order to:

- Maintain and increase financial support for legal aid in Iowa
- Develop a statewide communications program and branding strategy.
- Communicate clearly with clients and referring agencies about the services provided by legal aid.⁶

⁶Marketing and Communications Plan, p. 6.

Valerie Denny Communications recommended that :

[s]tories should focus on the impact that Iowa Legal Aid services had on the individual and should have strong human interest appeal (for example, a sympathetic client in a difficult situation that developed outside of their control). Stories should be presented in a way that emphasizes the outcome, rather than the legal proceedings and show the hopeful, positive impact legal aid has had on the person's life in the long term.⁷

The importance of telling the story cannot be emphasized enough. The "LSC Update," states that "Legal aid is about helping ordinary people with real-life problems. Client stories from the field illustrate the day-to-day struggles, and victories, of poor Americans seeking justice under law."⁸ The ability to track outcomes and main benefits will enable Iowa Legal Aid staff to identify success stories that illustrate the need for legal assistance and how that assistance improves the lives of low-income clients.

VI. Summary/Conclusion

Iowa Legal Aid has come a long way in developing the technological tools to capture, report, and analyze outcome information about the real value of the services provided to the clients. Yet, in many ways the program is just beginning to scratch the surface on what is possible with the new tools that are available. Iowa Legal Aid will continue to explore these issues, and has an interest in finding answers and in presenting issues and questions about the challenges faced in designing and implementing effective systems for measuring outcomes. The critical first step began with the implementation of Iowa Legal Aid's statewide database, along with its features of being highly adaptable and cost effective in terms of ongoing programming and development.

Concerns still exist about balancing the resources used for gathering, reporting, and analyzing of outcome information with the resources available for the services to clients. Iowa Legal Aid hopes that the use of technology can minimize the burden and expense of gathering, reporting, and analyzing outcome information, so as to maximize the benefit for clients.⁹ Iowa Legal Aid believes that outcomes evaluation, used with other tools, can be used to assess the quality and effectiveness of a legal service delivery system. Technology is just one of the tools to help measure performance.

⁷Valerie Denney Communications, "A Marketing and Communications Plan for Legal Aid In Iowa," April 2003, pp. 28-29.

⁸LSC Update, A Biweekly Summary of the Latest News and Political Developments Affecting the Civil Equal Justice Community.

⁹See Cotter, p. 18.

OUTCOME RECOMMENDATION

Iowa Legal Aid recommends that one outcome common to most legal services programs would be to measure how a client's status has changed in the area of domestic abuse. LSC could measure in a first year effort to collect outcomes data the effectiveness of services provided to domestic abuse survivors. Such an outcome that programs could measure are among those used by Iowa Legal Aid:

- 3701 Obtained restraining order
- 3702 Obtained restraining order-custody awarded
- 3703 Obtained restraining order-visitation awarded
- 3704 Obtained restraining order-OP visitation
restricted/denied
- 3705 Avoided/terminated restraining order
- 3706 Avoided/terminated restraining order-custody involved
- 3707 Obtained contempt of restraining order
- 3708 Obtained contempt of restraining order-custody
involved
- 3709 Avoided contempt of restraining order
- 3710 Avoided contempt of restraining order-custody
involved

SUPPLEMENT A

[illegible]

SUPPLEMENT B

[illegible]

SUPPLEMENT D

https://pika.iowalaw.org/demo/case.php?case_id=99802&screen=hotline

[Quick Links] Pika CMS > Case List > 14-02-00208 Search.. Case Number Go

Primary Client

[Robin L. Wing](#)
Address:
544 Indian Trail Road
Bloomington, IA 52501
Phone: (563) 694-4190
don't call after 5 p.m.
Alt. Phone: ()

Language: English
Birth Date:
County: Wapello
Gender: F
Disabled: No
SSN: 225-02-0002
▶ [edit](#)

Opposing Parties

[Hawk J. Wing](#)
▶ [remove](#)

Additional Parties

[Dove Wing](#) (Non-adv.
Household)
▶ [remove](#)

Actions

▶ [Focus Timer](#)
▶ Add [Tidbit](#)
▶ Add [LSC Other Matter](#)
▶ [Make a duplicate of this case](#)

▶ Add to this case:
Client: Client
First:
Middle:
Last (or Org. Name):
Jr., Sr., etc.:
Date of Birth:
SSN:
Add

Hotline Information

Hotline 1st Case Type:
Hotline 2nd Case Type:
Publication:
Unmet Need:
Unmet Need, in Hours:
Referred By: Self Referral
Referral To:
Income Level:
Strong/Frail:
Program Referrals:
Benefits Received:
Financial Info: Poverty Level: 40.0 %
Annual Income: \$ 7295.00
Assets: \$ 250.00
Save